

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP FOR SAFETY BEHAVIORS AND OCCUPATIONAL INJURIES OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SEVERITY

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Even though significant improvements have been achieved when it comes to workplace safety during the last decades, many of today's organizations are still suffering from high injury rates. Previous research shows support for the importance of leadership in improving workplace safety. Most of these studies have focused on the role of a particular leadership style for some safety outcome. The most commonly investigated leadership style in relation to safety is transformational leadership. A few studies have also examined the effect of transactional leadership on safety. In addition to these leadership styles, researchers have been studying the influence of a leadership specifically focusing on safety. In most cases, the concept of safety leadership is based on a more general leadership style (often transformational leadership) within which the behaviors of the leader are directed specifically towards safety. Although transactional leadership, transformational leadership and safety-specific leadership have all been studied in relation to safety in previous studies, no study up to date has investigated the relative importance of these three leadership styles. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the unique contributions of each of these three leadership styles (general transformational leadership, active transactional leadership and safety-specific leadership) to different safety outcomes, in an attempt to extend the understanding of their relative importance for improving workplace safety. In the present study, safety-specific leadership is thus examined as a separate leadership style apart from more global leadership styles. Safety-specific leadership is conceptualized as a leadership which is not necessarily characterized by transformational or transactional leader behaviors, but indicates the degree to which the subordinates perceive their leader to give focus and priority to safety, react to subordinates' safe/unsafe conduct (i.e., positive and negative feedback), and takes initiative to actions concerning safety issues.

Furthermore, most previous studies on leadership and safety have used only one or a couple of outcome variables as an indication of organizational safety. It is common to focus either on safety behaviors or accident records or injury rates. In the present study, the relative importance of the three leadership styles is related to several safety outcome variables; different safety behaviors as well as injury frequency. In addition, this study innovates by differentiating between minor and major injuries. By using several outcome variables and categorizing injury frequency into different degrees of severity, the study aims to broaden our understanding of the relative impact of the examined leadership styles on different safety outcomes.

Data was collected through a survey responded by 269 employees at a processing plant in Sweden in 2013. Regression analysis revealed that the leadership style contributing most to safety improvements was a safety-specific leadership, where a focus on safety is continuously emphasized by the leader. Although transformational leadership was slightly related to improvements in employee safety initiative behaviors, it did not contribute to any safety outcome over and above that of a safety-specific leadership. The transactional leadership style management-by-exception-active was found to be negatively related to safety, in that it was associated with less safety initiative behaviors and a larger number of minor injuries.

The results indicate that general transformational leadership can be beneficial for safety to a certain extent, but in order to achieve more extensive safety improvements it is imperative for leaders to engage in behaviors specifically focusing on safety. The main conclusion is therefore that the fact that leader behaviors are oriented towards safety is the most important factor affecting safety outcomes, regardless of the possible transformational or transactional elements involved in this leadership style. Another conclusion is that an overly monitoring and correcting leadership (as in certain aspects of transactional leadership) might not be an effective means to achieve improved safety but can rather lead to unsafe employee behaviors. The finding of an association between leadership and minor injuries but not with major injuries further suggests that leader behaviors mainly affects the occurrence of minor incidents at the workplace, but could also indicate that the categorization of injuries into different levels of severity could be beneficial for detecting relevant relationships between organizational factors and injury outcomes. This could be one reason for previous research using injury frequency as an outcome measure having showed contradicting results. The findings in the present study are

important for both practical and theoretical reasons in the strivings towards achieving improved workplace safety, in that it adds to the understanding of the relative importance of different leader behaviors and their relationships with various safety outcomes.

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